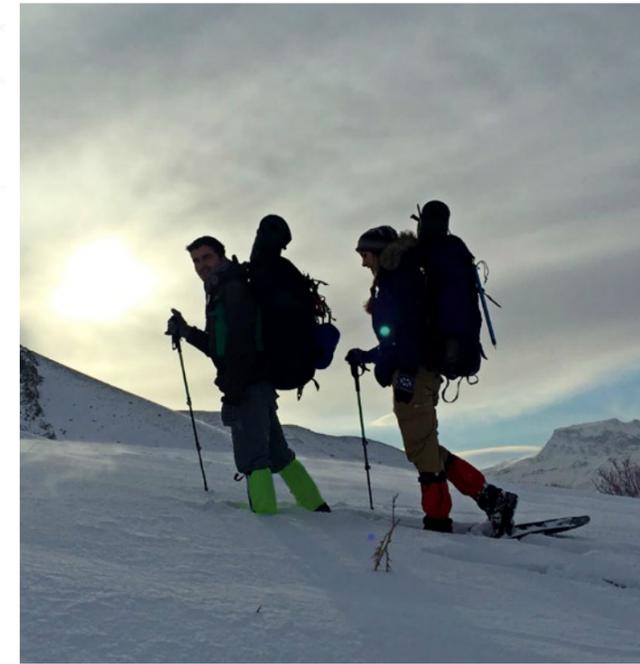


WINTER FLASHBACK:

Climbing Halgurd Mountain in Iraq

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At just over 3,600 meters in elevation, Halgurd Mountain is one of the few snow-covered peaks in the Middle East that is worthy of summiting. In January, I took a group of eight colleagues on an overnight winter trek in the Zagros Mountains, 170 kilometres northeast of Erbil, Iraq.



My favourite time to climb Halgurd Mountain is during the wintertime when days are short and the ground is covered by fresh snow. Hiking with a group in the mountains can be treacherous, so we hired a local guide in Choman to lead us. Driving the last five kilometres from Choman to the base of Halgurd is slow on snowy, mountainous roads with no other traffic and takes us 35 minutes. The scenery is stunning, but because of the snow, the road is closed. We park the cars and lug all the gear to our camp.

I reflect now with a smile at the thought of our group of weekend adventurers carrying 20 kg backpacks and hiking through the snow in Kurdistan about 10 kilometres from the Iranian border. Part of the challenge was

the lack of mountain-ready meals available, so we carried heavy canned food and cooking gear from home. It took us five hours to get from the cars to our campsite.

With the unpredictability of the weather, we awake at 04:00 to get an early start up



the mountain. It usually takes four hours to reach the summit from the main camp. We have breakfast and leave the tents by 05:00. When we start the long hike up the mountain, some clouds started to roll in, worrying me that we would not get to see anything that day. During the night watching the snowfall had been amazing, but now we were struggling climbing through such deep snow. We were wondering if we would be able to make it to the summit under these conditions. However, when we took our first rest break, I began to feel warm and noticed that the weather was clearing. Soon we could see the beautiful scenery of the Zagros Mountain range.

With the winter sun now shining through the cloud cover, everyone seemed invigorated once again. Breathing the freezing air when climbing a mountain is refreshing and we climb to the summit by 10:30 in the morning. Everyone made it with time to spare, returning to the main camp before sunset, and we relaxed in the amazing views of the beautiful mountains. It was freezing on the top, literally – our drinking water and energy snacks had all frozen! But it didn't matter, as we had achieved our goal: we climbed to the summit and made it back to camp safely in the middle of winter. We were excited after a challenging and difficult adventure and it felt like we were standing on top of the world.

The fun of life is in the challenge, not the comfort. Climbing a 3,600-meter snow covered mountain in Iraq is a great challenge. While comfort is a necessary escape from the human struggle, it makes for good balance: Iraq, snow, and mountains. As I write these words three months after our snowy winter adventure, the heat of summer is already upon us and I dwell on how we endure such challenges with a smile. Seeing the photographs of the frozen Zagros Mountains, our hiking group mulls over tea for our next adventure! ■